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University Standards and the Decline of Humane Learning

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We may begin a consideration of the problem of standards in universities with the most obvious, the most quantifiable (the fact that the quantifiable is the only persuasive thing to us is a symptom of the problem) change in standards during the last twenty years, undergraduate grade inflation. Although professors may no longer be very sure about what they measure themselves against, students do know that they are measured by those A, B, C, D, and F's, or rather those A's and B's, and the grade-point average which sums up their total achievement at the end of four years. In even the best universities the inflation in grades has matched that in the economy, with the difference that in the academic economy there is no way to inflate the A; it cannot be surpassed, so that among students there are now practically only the rich and the newly rich. A's are easy to come by, B's are the consolation prize; and unusual lack of attentiveness or failure to complete assignments results in a C. An F is an achievement, preferred by some to a C because it seems the result of an act of will on the part of its recipient rather than a sign of mediocrity. D had disappeared. With 40 to 60 percent of the students receiving honors, graduation ceremonies become something of an embarrassment for universities that regard themselves and are regarded as standard-bearers, for everyone knows that this is not a result of a breakthrough in pedagogy but of a cheapening of the product.

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CONSEQUENCES OF GRADE INFLATION

But what is wrong with this, particularly since there is good reason to think that college students are working as hard as they ever did, certainly harder than they did in the late sixties? The old system of grading was after all only a convention, and we simply adapted over time to a new one. Well, in the first place, the devalued currency may still serve for domestic purposes; but external consumers, that is, the professional schools (the market to which our products are now largely seeking to appeal), no longer trust our seal of approval. The college record does not reveal real talents or achievements, certainly not true superiority. Hence they rely on letters of recommendation and standardized tests. And since letters have suffered the same kind of inflation (after all, they are written by the professors who give the grades and whose generosity is encouraged by governmental threats to confidentiality), the tests emerge triumphant, possessing at least a certain harsh objectivity. So students too begin to consider the tests as genuine measures of accomplishment, and the machines of the Educational Testing Service replace the universities as the source of evaluation and standards. The idea of a liberal education with its multiplicity in unity, the variety of learning and sensitivity that it promotes, begins to fade as its authority, never effective for more than a brief moment in any event, is supplanted. The student can hardly take the university very seriously as the source of education, rather than as a propadeutic to vocational training, if it is not master in its own world, if what it uniquely gives is not understood to be what prepares him for the life he is going to lead. It is one thing for a student to want to be a doctor but know that a distinct university experience precedes medical training and that his admissibility to medical school will be determined by his undergraduate performance. It is quite another thing if he thinks that the university is preparing him for specialized examinations in the profession of his choice. In this latter case, the integrity and independence of this civilizing pause in life are undermined. It is somehow absurd that the four years of study and experience, which can reveal a student's virtues in a comprehensive and concrete way, are depreciated in favor of a one-shot test.

But there is much more. In spite of the meaninglessness of grades, the new dispensation has made grade-grubbers of the students. The grade-point average does count for something. The B is almost assured, thus the A becomes extremely desirable and apparently within the reach of almost anyone. So many A's are given that an A cannot be proof of real talent for or mastery of the discipline in question; it is merely useful for the larger purpose of keeping averages high. This heavy concentration on grades for their own sake is a direct consequence of the prejudice against grading of the sixties. Then it was argued that one should seek knowledge for its own sake, and ungraded or pass-fail course options were insisted on. Mindless reformism in its indifference to reality had its usual result, the exact opposite of what is intended.

Doubtless, the desire for distinction is not the same as concern for knowledge, but it is a powerful motive that can attract the young to studies they may later learn to love for themselves. If grades represent real achievement in a discipline, they act both as guardians of it and incentives for respecting it. Grades and honors are, if properly used, a means to education; disinterested love of knowledge is its proper result. The agitation against grades took this rare result of a good education to be the common possession of every beginning student. The success of that agitation suppressed both the motive for achievement and the awe for disciplines whose teachers do not respect them. But it did nothing to excise the natural love of honor from the souls of the young. This passion to be first, allied with the practical necessity for ranking students imposed by the outside world, preserved the importance of grades (which had inflated partly as a way of having grades while making them meaningless). The grade is thus both pursued and despised. Its significance in relation to the learning of a discipline has been effectively destroyed.

The consequences have been severe for the morale of students. There is now a certain self-irony, for they are aware that this sort of egalitarianism is fraudulent. Legitimate egalitarianism lets you be what you are; demagogic egalitarianism tells you that you are what you know you are not. If everyone is said to be beautiful, then the word loses its meaning without anyone's having benefited or even having been persuaded. It is ridiculous to say that half of all tailors or farmers or doctors are excellent and that practically all the rest are very good. Rather than leveling, our university egalitarianism has raised everyone into the aristocracy of the intellect. Of course, students don't believe any of this. They want real measures of their worth. They simply cease to respect the university as a place to be tested and formed for life and come to doubt the seriousness of their teachers.

And the whole cause of learning is done a grave disservice by the obvious arbitrariness of standards. Just as the college diploma no longer guarantees any definite learning, so the peaks, the honors diplomas in those universities recognized to be best, have been lowered. We face the danger that the real, uncompromising standard of truth will slip away from us while we are busy redistributing the distinction that by nature belongs to the pursuit of truth.

FACULTY RESPONSIBILITY

How did all this come to pass? The fault, of course, lies with the professors. They not only gave the grades but wanted to; and here lies the larger significance of this tale, for undergraduate grade inflation is only a symptom of a softening of the university's core. The fuzzing of the external standard applied to students is the reflection of decay in the internal standard in the professors' souls. They are no longer sure what they want to teach or even what they as scholars are doing or aiming at. But to be somewhat more precise, it is not professors in general whom I am characterizing, it is professors of humanities and social science. And, of course,

from their part of the university came the grade inflation. The natural scientists have a clearer grasp of their objects and of what constitutes distinction in their disciplines; they keep their eyes much more surely on the inner necessity of their science, are concerned primarily with its advancement and view achievements of students with that end in mind.

It does not do to say, as some do, that it was always so, that as long ago as Aristotle political science was not expected to be as exact as mathematics. His standards for judging political science were as stringent as those he applied to mathematics; they were merely of a different kind. And once degrees with high honors in philosophy or English were as rare as those in physics. No, something new happened, and it goes to the heart of the problematic relation of the life of the mind to democratic society. For this reason mere exhortation or censure will not suffice, any more than calls to republican virtue rallied the Romans when Rome had become a great empire. I mean to suggest not that our situation is as hopeless as that of the Romans, rather that we have to face a fundamental change in our spiritual situation, not just an egregious slippage in our standards.

RADICAL EGALITARIANISM AND INTELLECTUAL INTEGRITY OF THE UNIVERSITY

This weakness or softness in the humanities and social sciences clearly revealed itself in the 1960s. America went through one of its periodic fits of radical egalitarianism.[1] This is a phenomenon intrinsically connected with our regime, which is founded explicitly on philosophic principles of equality. The institutions established to incarnate that equality were intended to control the most radical egalitarian impulses, those that rebel against the inequalities necessary to preserve equality and promote human excellence. But those impulses are always with us, fueled by the presence of unjust inequalities and by doctrines of equality that do not accept the restraints thought necessary by the Founding Fathers. There is always the temptation to rebel against nature, against the natural inequalities of body and soul as well as against those derived from convention.

In the sixties this humor for the first time in our history struck out against the universities and intellectual life in general.[2] Previously our universities were somehow not the target of American populistic passion,

1. I am limiting myself to the American experience, although the intellectual problem itself (and its underlying political source) is global, producing somewhat different effects as it is refracted in various national media.

2. An apparently moderate expression of such radicalism is John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), which argues that all inequalities, and in particular superior talents, have a right to development and expression only so long as they benefit the most disadvantaged members of society. Talent is community property, to be cultivated or not according to the will of society. This book has become a standard text on rights and is accepted across a surprisingly broad spectrum of American opinion.

and the egalitarian response to the great East-Coast universities had been to build universities in their image across the country. The best American universities maintained a relatively serious intellectual posture, partly out of love of truth, partly out of snobbism, and partly because they had as models and censors the European universities, which had, up until World War II, the very highest standards and produced many truly great scholars. When the attack on the intellectual integrity of the university came, all three elements of this structure had already been undermined, and it collapsed at the first assault.

THE MORAL CLIMATE OF THE SIXTIES

One must try to reconstruct what professors were faced with in the sixties to understand their response. Students were in the vanguard of the onslaught, and professors found it hard to resist their strongly felt, or at least strongly expressed, sentiments. For professors, too, are American and find it difficult to resist public opinion. Moreover, in a country where utility is the dominant principle and the dignity of the theoretical life is correspondingly diminished, life flourishes only to the extent that those who live it and the community at large are of the comfortable persuasion that theoretical pursuits are useful. The quiet voice of reason hesitates before outbursts of moral indignation. And the first issue that came on the scene was the one best suited to touch American conscience: race. Slavery was America's greatest injustice, and it offended our leading, perhaps our only, principle of justice, equality. No thoughtful and decent citizen could shirk the responsibility of doing his utmost to stamp out its legacy. Citizenship and scholarship make different demands on us, and we generally lack a mediating principle. The university's purpose is to understand, not to change, the world. But that is not always the view of many of those who are part of it, and in the sixties many wanted to use the university to reform society.

It was one thing to make every effort to be sure that all those who could and wanted to participate in the special higher educational community did so. It was another thing to change its character in order to accommodate those who had been left out. But the latter happened in spite of, and partly because of, the best intentions. First, admissions standards were lowered. Then came a tacit, and sometimes explicit, easing of grading standards. There followed changes in curriculum and instant discovery of new fields of study to respond to demand. Next there was a fatal agreement to use race as a criterion in the search for faculty, which meant an abandonment of the university's hard-won transcendence of race, class, nation, and religion—a transcendence based only on the universality of truth. As a consequence, segregation in housing accommodations and even in the classroom began to be tolerated. And, finally, one witnessed repeated and ill-resisted attacks on freedom of speech and freedom of thought. These were joined to an even more ominous self-doubt as to the integrity of the disciplines—weren't they after all more or less subtly racist? All this was accompanied by a surge

of Marxist thinking that interpreted the university—previously held to be the symbol and the reality of liberal democracy's devotion to the principle that the truth shall make men free—as the vehicle of "bourgeois ideology."

On the back of the moral sentiments given currency by the civil rights movement rode the antiwar movement that, although its appeal to legitimacy as a force within the university had no ground whatsoever, increased the passions of self-righteousness to such a degree that whatever was demanded by its proponents became instantly respectable. The essence of its appeal was hostility to all authority, not merely the authority of elected officials (elections, of course, are all fraudulent) who were sending the young men to war, but also the authority of tradition and that of teachers, and, even more, the authority of talent, virtue, science, and the quest for truth. The university's organization, the distinction between professors and students, and the primacy of learning over teaching, were understood to be part of a general system of domination, as was slavery. The result of these opinions was great suspicion of the faculty, an erosion of its autonomy and central position in the university, and a further transformation of the curriculum to meet demand, a sweeping away of much of traditional learning that could not justify itself in the eyes of the students.

The last of the three great waves of moralizing that broke on the university was feminism. It took advantage of the general mood of moral certainty, profited by the analogy to slavery, and claimed a stake in the ideology of liberation from domination. Feminism did not alter the tendencies set afloat by the other waves; it only reinforced them. In particular, it broadened the attack on the traditional curriculum, in that most works of literature and philosophy can be said to be sexist and thereby discredited, whereas charges of racism can be leveled at only a few. And insistence that the university take part in the fight against sexism, particularly against conventional male and female roles, required a much more difficult and questionable effort because, while almost everyone in universities was against racial distinctions and knew in some measure what it would mean to overcome them, at least in the universities, neither of these conditions prevailed in the case of the women's movement.

The three cardinal sins of the egalitarian creed—racism, sexism, and elitism—became dogma in the university. Since the scholar's eye is very easily diverted from his elusive goal, which has so little popular appeal, the whole apparatus set up to fulfill the new goals proved very distracting. Universities acquired new bureaucrats to oversee the policies, and the old ones pledged to dedicate themselves to their efficacy. The federal government, instructed and emboldened by the example the universities were themselves setting, had no hesitation about imposing affirmative action on them. Many universities assigned to the task an administrator with the wondrous title of "compliance officer." Now, no one who is thinking about such things can be thinking about education and scholarship. The spectacu-

lar lawsuits that hit the front pages do not tell the real story of the subtle poison that now permeates the atmosphere of the university. The special character and vocation of the university and its inner confidence are threatened. Among other things, hypocrisy runs rampant, the hypocrisy of those who insist the programs work and tamper with the facts or deceive themselves, and the hypocrisy of those who believe they don't work but who know the fatal consequences of being tagged a nonbeliever.

"ANTIELITISM" AND UNIVERSITY PURPOSE

So-called elitism is the vice most directly related to standards, because standards are what is meant by elitism. And antielitism provides the greatest challenge to the university. Antiracism and antisexism were only dangerous to the extent that they promote an egalitarianism inimical to the intellectual life. Properly understood, demands for genuine equality of blacks and women can be easily met without changing the essential character of the university. But the stupid, the tendentious, the self-seeking and the intellectually lazy cannot be so integrated. The various disciplines require talents of a sort that are hard to deny and which no teacher should fail to favor. There is a natural rank order—not necessarily always respected, but always there—that education must encourage, for the good of the community, for the good of learning, and for justice to individuals.

Elitism is nothing but a pseudoscientific term popularized by social science which makes something natural seem conventional and perverted. And, in some measure, the rhetoric of antielitism was resisted; it was resisted by the natural scientists. They passed the buck to the social scientists and the humanists, who proved more accommodating. Natural scientists too were Americans and were in general favorably disposed to the new mood. But they were also sure of what they were doing. The optimistic view that science is the necessary and sufficient condition of democracy—the ambience in which science slumbered with good conscience—was fading, partly under the influence of the radical critique; however, their objects, the way in which those objects should be studied, and what constitutes truth about them are all clear to scientists and agreed upon. The model science is mathematics. Perhaps contemporary science has purchased its authority by a narrowness that is in the long run deleterious to science itself; it has certainly done so by making itself incapable of speaking about anything human and the world of concern to us.

But for all that, the scientists cannot deceive themselves that they are teaching science when they are not. They have powerful operational measures of competence. And inwardly they believe, at least in my experience, that the only real knowledge is scientific knowledge. In the dilemma that faced them—mathematicians wanted, for example, to see more blacks and women hired but could not find nearly enough competent ones—they in effect said that the humanists and social scientists should hire them. Under-

lying this attitude was a profound contempt for the humanities and social sciences, although the natural scientist often paid lip service to them. Indeed, the sixties brought to the surface the submerged fact that the university no longer has any real unity of purpose, no community of subject matter or vision. The natural and the human sides of the university are now almost accidental traveling companions, as it were, sharing the same ship. Neither really has much need of the other. The split is papered over with clichés about culture for undergraduate consumption; but after the liberal education part of the curriculum is gotten through, the two worlds part company never again to meet.

Believing that there are no real standards on the other side, scientists assumed that adjustments there could easily be made. With profoundest irresponsibility, they went along with various aspects of affirmative action, assuming, for example, that any minority students admitted without proper qualifications would be taken care of by other departments if they did not do well in science. The scientists did not anticipate large-scale failure of such students with the really terrible consequences that would entail; they took it for granted that they would succeed somewhere else in the university.

COLLAPSE OF CONVICTION

The really crucial aspect of this whole story is that the humanists and social scientists gave in or, rather, gave cheerful assent; for I can only believe that had they anything like the conviction the scientists had as to the value and validity of their work, they would have fought and succeeded in their fight. But that conviction was lacking, and we must address ourselves to the reasons for that lack of conviction in order to diagnose our ills and prescribe for them.

In the first place, social science and the humanities deal with the human world on which the political movements of the sixties and seventies were trying to impose a new interpretation. For the activists these disciplines were, to the extent that they in any way promoted differing views, the enemy that had to be defeated. No radical group, so far as I know, thought relativity or evolution notions that had to be opposed.[3] Only certain applications of natural sciences—providing arms for imperialism or technology for capitalists in their efforts to pollute the environment—were condemned, and scientists could easily disavow such uses of their work and were eager to do so.

But American historians taught that equality is the fundamental principle of this regime and that this principle, subscribed to by all the Founding Fathers, in the long run doomed slavery. These professors were by their very teachings enemies of those whose interest was to show that this regime is

3. Earlier communists, of course, did. But the movements of the sixties were less theoretical and less concerned with self-contradiction.

root and branch racist and must be supplanted by another. In order to keep in the good graces of the wave of the future, so famous a historian as Edmund Morgan had a sudden conversion and found that equality was an ideological invention of the Virginia aristocrats to deceive poor whites into allying with rich ones to keep down the slaves rather than following their true class interests, which would have dictated solidarity of poor whites and blacks.[4] Thus history makes its autocritique and purges itself of racism. Only those who were willing to make such concessions could avoid the danger of frightful accusations and of losing their moral footing as equality moved forward.

But it is not only that the humanists and social scientists were alone in the front lines that caused their weakness. Rather, concurrently, they were experiencing an inner doubt about the reality of their disciplines. In the simplest terms, they too believe that knowledge is scientific knowledge and that to the extent they are not scientific, they have no foundations. Here the situations of the humanities and the social sciences diverge. They are united in that both must talk about human things and that *the* model of science or knowledge makes it very difficult to do so. But their responses to this difficulty differ. The social sciences try in one way or another to be scientific, to quantify the study of man and thus break away from the tainted embrace of the humanists and escape to join the naturalists in their white laboratory garb. The humanists, in contrast, seek another source of legitimacy, hoping the sciences will cede them a little piece of their empire, which they will promise not to explain away. *Imagination* and *creativity* are typical watchwords against the advance of science, but they prove increasingly empty to the extent that they cannot find a place in nature.

REACTION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

This difference accounts for the difference between the humanities and social sciences in their reactions to the demands placed on them by students and the community. The social sciences, with the partial exception of economics, had long since abandoned the attempt to give a simply mechanical account of man and society in favor of Max Weber's method that distinguishes facts from values. Social facts, like natural facts, admit of scientific treatment. Social science, it was alleged, had not previously succeeded because it mixed value judgments with factual statements. A value-free social science could attain to the same kind of objectivity as natural science. But this assertion is at the same time an admission that something specifically human escapes the purview of science. And that something is what is most important from the point of view of life. Protestantism, democracy, and science are all equally values, themselves unsupported by reason, that form and transform the facts reason apprehends.

4. *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975).

Thus when students accused social scientists of studying the wrong things, of being indifferent to values and marching to the drum of those who paid them, the latter had very little to say in response. They could not criticize the students' values on rational grounds; they were actually intimidated by those values, both in their content and by the students' commitment to them. They could not seriously defend academic freedom because it is merely one value, a preference no more valid than any other preference. Hot commitment at least evidences its holder's concern for values, a claim that cool reason cannot make. In the topsy-turvy perspective introduced by the fact-value distinction, irrational intensity becomes a means, the only means, of validating preferences. The students brought this home to their teachers. There was a premium on commitment, real or feigned (and there are no objective criteria for distinguishing between the two); and the social scientists began to wonder whether their preference for liberal democracy was not just conformism as opposed to the more unconventional preferences of the students.

David Easton, in a presidential address to the American Political Science Association, gave the response.[5] He said, in essence, that social scientists had been insensitive to value questions and that if the students, now called "post-behavioralists," would leave them be, in the future social science would be useful to their ends. He handed over the sword of sovereignty to them and surrendered the university to the only two forces that have much vitality in the contemporary world, science and public opinion. And, as scientists frequently see with anguish, public opinion is the senior partner. Science provides the power; public opinion decides how it will be used. Easton admitted that reason and hence the university have no standard with which to guide, instruct, or resist the preferences of public opinion. He called for more "engagement" on the part of the social sciences, an engagement responding to the demand for "relevance."

REACTION OF THE HUMANITIES

Professors of the humanities, in contrast, reacted with a kind of despair. They sensed themselves to be irrelevant, for what did Sophocles or Milton have to do with the urgent issues of the day? Many of them threw in their lot with the revolution almost as a form of penance for having idled in green pastures while there was suffering in the world. The humanities were in an uncomfortable position. They do not have the authority of science, and they are somehow connected with tradition, style, and form—all of which are contrary to the taste of democracy and anathema to the radical movements. The peculiar agony of their situation can be judged by the kind of arguments about proper writing style to which teachers of English have had to

5. "The New Revolution in Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 63, no. 4 (December 1969): 1051–1061.

stoop and by how many of them have joined the attack on grammar. The humanities curriculum was ravaged in the sixties. Respect for and knowledge of the classics have declined drastically.

The humanities had no response like that of Easton's to make. They could only stand idly by, watching their clientele leave and preparing to water down what they served. What happens to standards in the humanities when the old literature is not taken seriously is illustrated by an example the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives for *standard*: "We always return to the writings of the ancients as the standard of true taste." This is the polar star of the humanities as is mathematics for the natural sciences. When it does not shine, we are adrift; and the fact that it was clouded over is the cause of the easy capitulation, which in turn is the cause of its near extinction.

The humanities are the realm of deepest crisis. To begin with, nobody is quite sure what they are. The field has no rhyme or reason. If one looks at natural sciences one sees the sense of its divisions and also their interconnections. They can give an account of themselves. Although the status of the social sciences is much more problematic, something similar can be said of them. The humanistic part of the university in contrast is just a heap of departments without any discernible order or vision of a whole of which they are parts, no account of what kind of knowledge they are seeking or what they contribute to the education of the whole man. At best, with a sort of insecure snobbism, they say they stand for culture. The field looks like a pile of leftovers—the incomprehensible and humane residue—after the various sciences divided up the world. In the midst of the humanities sits the enfeebled giant philosophy, which once had the overview of the disciplines and assigned them their place in the coherent whole of human knowledge. It has become, mostly, either history of philosophy, that is, history of now refuted attempts to establish such an overview, or methods of science, the rules by which the disciplines must be played. Nobody really looks for the truth, or a significant portion of it, in the humanities. They seem to exist as the shrine of the unsatisfied longings for knowledge of the good life.

HUMANISTS AND SCIENTISTS

Illustrative of our present intellectual situation is a recent article in *The New York Times* describing the visit of a professor of music to Rockefeller University. The life scientists working there brought bag lunches and listened to the musicologist's lecture. The project was inspired by C. P. Snow's silly ideas about the two cultures, the rift between which will be healed if humanists learn the second law of thermodynamics and physicists read Shakespeare. This enterprise would, of course, be something other than an exercise in tolerance and spiritual uplift only if the physicists learned something important for his physics from Shakespeare and the humanist similarly profited from the second law of thermodynamics. The fact is that

nothing of the sort ensues, that for the scientist the humanities are recreation (often deeply respected by him, for he sees that more is needed than what he offers but is puzzled about where to find it), and that for the humanist the natural sciences are at best indifferent, at worst the alien and the hostile.

The *Times* quoted Joshua Lederberg, the president of Rockefeller University, an institution from which philosophy was recently banished, as saying after the lecture that C. P. Snow was on the right track but "counted wrong," there are not two but many cultures, one example of which is that of the Beatles. This represents the ultimate trivialization of a trivial idea that was just a rest station on a downward slope. Lederberg did not see in the humanities the human knowledge that complements the study of nature but just another expression of what is going on in the world. In the end, it is all more or less sophisticated show business. *Culture* here has exactly the same debased meaning it has in sociology when youth or drug "cultures" are spoken of. What originally had high meaning becomes eviscerated and meaningless in a sea of democratic relativism. *Sous entendu* in Lederberg's statement and almost everyone's belief is that natural science has a special status. The rest is just a matter of opinion or taste. There is no human truth for the humanities to get at.

THE BANEFUL INFLUENCE OF NIETZSCHE

This crisis in the intellectual unity of the university and the concomitant lack of communication among its members have been brewing for a very long time, and the university disturbances only sharpened them and made them more obvious. From antiquity through the eighteenth century, science was an articulated whole, each of whose parts was necessary and coherent with the rest. Man was one part of nature, and the study of man was understood to be a rational natural science. The teachings of physics and biology were not such as to make man as we know him incomprehensible. The great philosophers were equally great natural scientists and great political scientists. But toward the end of the eighteenth century, physics had emancipated itself and attained what was believed to be metaphysical neutrality. Its results contributed little or nothing to the original question of philosophy, What is the good life? Nature as it appeared in mathematical atomism was too low to act as a standard for morality.

Under the aegis of philosophy a new organization of the sciences was established that seemed to save the human phenomena. The distinction between nature and freedom, or nature and history, was established. Natural science was to study nature, and human science man. The distinction was founded on what were argued to be two dimensions of the real. The human sciences, particularly history, philology, esthetics, and morality, were to provide the rational basis for the understanding of man and the answers to the questions of greatest concern to him. Under the influence of this inspiration the great nineteenth-century scholarship flourished: it had

its purpose in the moral result that was expected of it. However, the results were not such as to justify the expectations of, for example, Kant, while the separation from nature had become permanent. The aimlessness and dispiritedness of the human sciences were powerfully diagnosed by Nietzsche among others as early as the 1870s. And he added a new element to the academic malaise by arguing powerfully that the human sciences could never be sciences, that reason about human things was but rationalization. He invented the term *value* in its modern sense and argued that values are products of the unconscious and works of art.

Nietzsche's teachings, which were profoundly antiacademic, became a powerful part of academic opinion and a major element in the lack of coherent purpose in the human studies. The impulse he gave did not establish new disciplines or revitalize the old ones. Rather, it contributed to their self-doubt and an eagerness to attach themselves to modernism in the nonacademic arts. The new social sciences invaded their domain and took away a large part of the belief that important truths were to be learned from them. They became otiose and largely antiquarian. While natural science went from success to success, the place of the humanities in the university was preserved by tradition, not by any living need for them. And their primary function came to be preservation of tradition.

DEMOCRACY AND THE VOCATION OF THE HUMANITIES

But this is just where modern regimes are most inimical to the intellectual life. As Tocqueville so brilliantly showed, men in democracies have confidence in their own judgments and above all accept no authorities. Tradition is just information. Moreover, the principle of utility dominates their lives. Natural science can be admired for its utility in the production of well-being. But the humanities cannot; and to the extent they try to justify themselves on utilitarian grounds to an audience motivated by utility, they corrupt themselves. They are of value precisely because they are reminders of something other than utility. Their highest vocation in a democracy is to present alternatives to the dominant views of man and the good life for the sake of freedom of the mind. But that vocation is most threatened and least appreciated in a democracy. When the humanists themselves doubt the value of tradition, the cause is hopeless. Only the most uncompromising awareness of and attention to the authentic seriousness of Plato or Shakespeare can keep the flame alive.

And I contend that that concern is now very weak. The latest trend (succeeding many others, all of which had as their purpose to find something useful in the classics without having to take them seriously as authorities) is criticism, particularly a new brand, a Nietzscheanism at third hand. One form of it is called deconstructionism, which is premised on the impossibility of understanding authors as they understood themselves. This means that we cannot look for objective wisdom in the writers of the past. We are, as it were, the creators of the texts. Whether intentionally or

not, this conceit most successfully of all cuts us off from the influence of the past and is the final step in democratization. The teachers of this view are the Huey Longs of the intellectual world, every man a critic.

My argument is that the humanities above all should be the source of standards for the university as a whole, as opposed to the specialized criteria provided by natural science. The dedication to the great classics of philosophy and literature generates nonarbitrary standards, and the motive of that dedication is the relevance of those classics to our situation. For we can only recognize that there is an intellectual crisis in the light of the standards they provide. They may not have the answers, but they can show us both the questions and give us guidance about how to study them. The burning issue always and especially now is the place of man in nature. Contempt of that issue is the source of the disunity in the university. The disease is above all in the humanities, and the cure lies there, too.